

**ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION**  
**Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 10005**  
**1611 Marble Canyon Road**  
**Bullhead City, Arizona 86442**  
**Saturday, August 12, 2006**

**M I N U T E S**

**Call to Order** – The meeting was called to order at 10:10 a.m. by Chairman Ellis. The Posting of the Colors was done by a three-man color guard from the Ira Hayes American Legion Post 84, Sacaton, Arizona. Chairman Ellis led the Pledge of Allegiance.

**Members Present**

Advisory Commission Members

Webb Ellis, Chairperson  
Joe Bibich  
Gary Fredricks  
Linda Fulkerson  
Phillip Quochytewa  
Kenneth Yamanouchi

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Lee Borgen, ADVS Vets' Benefit Counselor

**Members Absent**

Robert Boyd  
Tom Dingwall  
Tom Heaney

**Introductions:** Chairman Ellis welcomed the approximately 40 guests and thanked them for coming. He expressed the Commission's appreciation to the VFL Post and its staff for hosting the meeting. He introduced Bullhead City Councilman Jack Hakim who graciously welcomed the Commission on behalf of the city. The Commissioners introduced themselves. Chairman Ellis conveyed the regrets of Director Pat Chorpennig, Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS), who was out of state and unable to attend. Lee Borgen was introduced as the Veterans' Benefits Counselor serving the Bullhead City area.

**Opening:** The minutes of the July 13, 2006 meeting were approved as written.

**Communications:** There was no report provided.

**Legislative Update:** Chairman Ellis reported that the recent legislative session was the most favorable toward veterans in recent memory despite partisan resistance of many legislators until the very end of the session. A key aspect of the eventual agreement forged between the Governor's budget and the legislature added 21 Veterans' Benefits Counselors (VBC) to augment the current staff of only 19 in serving Arizona's 654,000 veterans. Commissioner Bibich was a member of the Governor's Arizona Veterans

Task Force that recommended the programs now funded in the 2006/2007 budget. He used charts to illustrate the problem of trying to serve Arizona's veterans in all corners of the state with only 19 VBC's. Even 21 additional will not come close to meeting the VA minimum standard of one VBC for every 10,000 veterans. He also noted that on August 21, the Mohave County Board of Supervisors will vote to donate office space at the Kingman fairgrounds for use as a veterans' service office. It's expected that one of the new positions will be assigned to Kingman.

Monies also are budgeted for the State's share (\$10M) of a new State Veterans Home in Tucson (the VA will provide the balance of funds), and a new State Veterans Cemetery at Camp Navajo near Flagstaff. Some concern was voiced about the State's ability to use the \$10M within the two-year window. It was noted that there should not be a problem but if there is, an extension by the Arizona legislature is a likely outcome.

Another provision of the 2006/2007 budget is \$50,000 to conduct five Veteran Supermarket Expos annually throughout the state. The Department and the Commission are committed to reach out to our veterans. The first of these will be held on Saturday, October 21, in Chandler. It's being held in Chandler since the city is funding the event itself, but ADVS will manage it. The concept embodies providing representatives of state and federal agencies such as Social Security, Medicare, Tricare, VA Regional Office, VA medical, ADVS, and many others to answer questions/address issues of Arizona's veterans. It's also an extremely important opportunity to solicit information for the Arizona Veterans' Registry. The Registry, a secure data collection effort, will enable the Department and Veterans First, LTD, a non-profit 501 (c) (3) corporation, to keep Arizona's veterans updated on important, veteran-related information. The expo also will afford Veterans' Service Organizations the opportunity to visit with, and recruit, veterans.

Chairman Ellis also announced a special event that will be held on Thursday, September 21, from 4:00 p.m. until 8:00 p.m. at Wesley Bolin Plaza located just east of the Arizona State Capitol. This event truly is a veterans' extravaganza that will feature all of the aspects of the expo, but with extras thrown in. First and foremost, every legislative candidate who wins in the primary election will be invited to attend and be provided with a table to display candidacy promotional items. It will be a golden opportunity for our candidates to express their support of veterans, and for those veterans attending, the chance to meet and query the candidates on issues important to them. This event also will be used to introduce the new Arizona Freedom License Plate. It will be available to any Arizonan registering a vehicle and \$17 of every \$25 will go to the Veterans Donation Fund. The plate is scheduled to be available starting November 1. It is hoped that at least a couple of thousand veterans will come out for this event. Free hot dogs, sodas, and music will be provided.

**Strategic Plan Overview:** Chairman Ellis explained the roll of the Advisory Commission and its region concept and assignments. He then turned the meeting over to the two Commissioners assigned to Region 4 (Yuma, Mohave, LaPaz Counties), Joe Bibich and Linda Fulkerson, to conduct the town hall portion.

## **Open Discussion/For the Good of the Order:**

VA Clinic for Bullhead City. Although a federal issue, the recent success of grassroots efforts in Globe were cited as a possible approach by Bullhead City to lobby VAMC in Phoenix, local legislators, and area veterans.

### Definition of a VBC and difference between VBC and Veteran Service Officer (VSO)

Lee Borgen explained that the essential difference is the VBC is a full-time paid employee accredited directly with the VA. Most Chapter and Post VSO's are volunteers. Most veteran service organizations have a National Service Officer (NSO), frequently located at the VA Regional Office. NSO's are accredited with the VA. The Chapter or Post service officer sends his/her claims paperwork to their organization's NSO who checks it over and submits it to VA. She explained briefly about VBC ongoing refresher training and that many veterans' service organizations do not have the funds to send their service officers to school for formal training. She emphasized that VSO's are very valuable as contact points for veterans, their dependents and survivors and that she works closely with them. Ms. Borgen helps the VSO's to stay involved in service work as they may choose, from doing claims paperwork to handing out business cards and referring people to her.

Impact of snowbirds of local VA healthcare Lee Borgen commented that the issue has been of concern for many years at all levels. Again a federal issue, VA healthcare system does have a system in place for money to be shifted when local VA facilities provide services to people from other areas of the country. The money transfer is slow, but does take place. There was a lot of discussion concerning the level of services available and that there is a lack of communication/cooperation between VA facilities when it comes to providing patient information and records.

Lack of VA Medical System responsiveness to female veterans Commissioner Fulkerson explained that most VA medical centers now have appropriate facilities and providers to treat women, but the level of accommodation may vary between centers. She cited the Phoenix VA Medical Center and its Women Veterans Coordinator, Jean Cooper, as an example of the system working very well. There was a lot of discussion concerning equality of care, services and benefits for female versus male veterans, but improvement is being seen.

Lack of cooperation between military, VA, and civilian medical facilities. Although a problem, Commissioner Yamanouchi cited several examples of the system beginning to work. One is Luke Air Force Base where cooperation with the Del Webb Hospital in Sun City West between the Air Force and the hospital is working very well, especially regarding women patients. Another is Tripler Army Medical Center in Hawaii which is staffed by Army, Navy, Air Force and the VA. Nellis AFB in Nevada is funded by VA and the Air Force. It opened in 1995 as a joint VA/USAF venture and has worked very well. There are others that are having equal success sharing staff and facilities despite the numerous bureaucratic roadblocks that need to be overcome.

Lack of publicity of benefits and entitlements available to veterans. The attendee consensus was loud and immediate that too many veterans have absolutely no idea that they have any entitlements from anyone. Many do not even know they are veterans! There was much discussion on what is being done and how improvements can be made to better inform veterans. Expanded use of the Veterans' Registry was strongly recommended. Several attendees filled out the forms during the meeting, and a number of forms were left with others for subsequent distribution. It was recommended that the form should be a staple at the various state conventions of the Veterans Service Organizations.

Councilman Hakim suggested greater use of public access television, noting that Bullhead City Council meetings are recorded and aired on local channel 8. He would like to see someone attend City Council meetings and speak to veterans' issues during the Call to the Public agenda item. He offered to facilitate that for the Tri-City area through the Tri-City Council that has been developed to coordinate efforts and resources between Bullhead City, Kingman and Lake Havasu City.

Dean Edwardsen, a volunteer with the Western Arizona Council of Governments (WACOG) commented that he sees many veterans but has no information on resources available to them. He also noted that he has access to many state resources for the disadvantaged such as the Benefits CheckUp Arizona; and felt that ADVS should be made aware of these resources. Lee Borgen encouraged him to get with her after the meeting to exchange contact information and to facilitate collaboration to benefit veterans.

Commissioner Yamanouchi interjected that everyone needs to be aware of National Guardsmen returning from active duty and ensure they get to a VA facility and have a baseline physical to document their conditions upon return from the battlefield. They receive very little information prior to demobilization to their home state whereas members of the other reserve components under federal jurisdiction have better access to information and services. The recent MOU between the Arizona National Guard and the VA Regional Office should improve this situation for the Guard.

State income tax break for veterans.

Another provision emanating from the recent legislative session was to exempt military pay to Arizona service members, Active, Guard and Reserve, while they are on active duty. Commissioner Fredricks also pointed out that retirees are entitled to an annual tax exemption of \$2500 from their retired pay. The consensus among the attendees was that many people aren't aware of these entitlements, nor are their accountants. The \$2500 exemption does appear in the new tax software programs for those who do their own taxes.

Need for more town hall meetings in northwestern Arizona. Chairman Ellis reiterated the Commission's intent to visit each of its four regions annually. The first visit to Region 1 was to Yuma a year ago. Next year another site will be selected in the three-county area. One of the longer term objectives of the Commission is to establish area veterans' advisory councils that the Commission can establish lines of communication with. During a recent dry-run expo in Flagstaff, the Office of the Mayor indicated an interest in establishing such a council for northeastern Arizona. The Commission sent a letter wholeheartedly supporting such an effort and included a copy of the by-laws that the City of Phoenix uses for its own veterans advisory council. Councilman Jack Hakim indicated that he would like to do the same thing for his area. The Commission assured him of its support and will provide him a letter and information similar to Flagstaff. The veterans' expos will also provide outreach to veterans throughout the state.

Arizona Veterans Memorial in Bullhead City: Councilman Hakim announced plans are progressing for a local veterans memorial. With the recent sale of the Ramada Express Hotel and Casino (in nearby Laughlin, NV), Bullhead City hopes to purchase materials used by the Ramada to pay tributes to veterans if the new owners don't want them. They will become part of a museum in conjunction with the memorial.

**CLOSING:** Chairman Ellis thanked Commissioners Bibich and Fulkerson for their support in conducting the meeting, and again expressed the Commission's sincere appreciation to VFW Post 10005 for hosting the meeting, AL Post 84 for Posting the Colors, and to all who attended. He also recognized Doris Goodale, a primary candidate for state representative in District 3, who was in attendance. He hopes to see her in Phoenix on September 21. It was also agreed that the Posting of the Colors should become a routine of all subsequent region Commission meetings.

**ADJOURNMENT:** The meeting adjourned at 12:10 p.m. Commissioners were reminded of the next meeting on September 14 at the Arizona State Veterans Home in Phoenix. It will begin at 8:00 a.m. to allow for a private Commission orientation for the new Commissioners beginning at 10:00 a.m.